The kitchen in my mema's house smelled of cigarettes and coffee. Mema had a heavy set frame, with short white hair, and always wore glasses. I see the image of her sitting at the head of the table inhaling long drags of a cigarette, and as a child I always found it amusing when smoke came out her nose. The coffee steaming in her cup, just milk, no sugar, and the "big pot" constantly brewing when family was there. The talking was boisterous and the ash from the tip of her cigarette long. Crushed butts in her ashtray next to her mug. So many Sundays spent here as a child, sitting on Mema's lap, listening to adult chatter, or playing with my cousins. The basement had an array of pipes jutting from the ceiling. My sisters, my cousins, and I would swing from the pipes like Olympic gymnasts. Having fun was so simple in those days.

Days got hot in summer and our gatherings moved to the backyard. The above ground pool filled with swimmers, and Mema sitting at the head of the picnic table. She sat in her housecoat watching us swim, never getting in herself. She was always smiling at us while we swam, and watched us jump in and out, and splash. Even in summer, the coffee was still perking but our usual sauce, macaroni, and meatballs transformed into grilled hot dogs, cheeseburgers, and macaroni salad with tuna. The hot sun added a glow to Mema’s olive skin. I can still feel the softness of her skin as I would hold her hand or kiss her cheek. She felt soft on the outside but had a stern personality on the inside. She wasn’t the little, old, soft-spoken lady in the corner, but a driving force, the matriarch of the family. When she spoke others listened and did what was told. Seven years later, Papa still doesn’t know what to do because no one is telling him.

Mema gave the best hugs with a full grasp, arms around you, and your head nuzzled in her chest. She always carried extra weight, which added cushion to an already warming embrace. I envision her note cards sent to my college campus weekly, carrying my $5 and signed from her and yogi (her beloved Shi-tzu). When asked why Papa didn’t sign the card, Mema plainly replied, “If he wants to send you a card, he can send it himself.” It all made so much sense in Mema’s world. The trips to Massachusetts to visit me at school, ended each time with Mema taking my laundry home to clean, sometimes even having Papa return it the next day. The laundry had such a fresh, crisp scent, reminding me of her as I smelled it. As I graduated from college in 2001, I never imagined only a few months later Mema would have passed away.

The summer of 2001 she was diagnosed with stage 4 breast cancer, already spread into her bones and various other places. She underwent treatments and vowed to fight the disease. She had so much to live for, and never quit. The pain was visible on her face, but she never complained. Even as she eventually was admitted to the hospital, her only complaint was that the TV in her room did not get the Yankees’ games. In exchange for shoulder rubs, she would offer me $5 or $10. Her bones aching because of the cancer, but she still had to give me my allowance. It was around her that I was forever a child. I was always innocent in her eyes. As she grew closer to the end, she made sure to explain her extreme love for her children and grandchildren. We always knew she loved us, but the memories of her saying it one last time will stick with us forever.